

Computer Games and Reading

By Alejandro G. Martinez (Mexico)

The phrase computer games brings to mind battles, fights, and other kinds of violence. But that is not all there is. Some computer games can be helpful in enhancing reading in the English classroom. They can make reading interesting by providing an objective that has immediate results: succeeding at a game. Thus, students do not stop to think that they are reading, but they just go right ahead and do it!

Another advantage of these games is that they are “user friendly.” A person does not need to know a lot about computers to be able to use these programs.

There are many examples of this sort of game, but I want to focus on just one. It is called *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, by Ron Gilbert, David Fox, and Noah Falstein. This game follows the plot of the film of the same name, so if one has seen the film, it is easy to know what to do next. However, it is not essential to have seen the movie.

“Indy” has an animated image on the screen at all times. The game itself has a well-defined structure. It contains basically three kinds of interaction between the player and the computer: (1) The student has to read a dialogue between Dr. Jones and someone else. This must follow the plot, so the player cannot change anything. In this manner Indy learns his father has disappeared, presumably looking for the Holy Grail, and from then on the plot unfolds. (2) There are dialogues where the player has to decide what Indy says next. The computer usually gives from two to four options, as when Dr. Jones goes into his classroom and all of his students are complaining because they have been waiting all day for him to sign their cards. The player can have Indy say one of the following sentences:

Excuse me, but I’ve got to be going.

Out of my way, kids!

Just a moment, folks. I’m sure we can work something out.

Perhaps you all should find another faculty advisor.

(3) A series of commands appears at the bottom of the screen. The player chooses one of them to tell Indy what to do. For example, make him walk out of a room, pick up something, look at something, and so on.

All the dialogues include realistic language, and they contain a good dose of humour as well. For instance, Indy knows his father (Henry) has disappeared. If the player decides to have Indiana go to his father’s house to try and discover a clue to his whereabouts, and, say, orders Indy to open his father’s dresser, he refuses, saying: “And go through dad’s underwear? Never!”

If the teacher wants to help students out and have them read a bit more, s/he can prepare a short guide on what steps to follow to make headway in the game, and/or prepare a short introduction to the plot, or pre-teach some new vocabulary, and so on.

Other games that can be used for the same purpose are *Simcity*, by Maxis, *Space Quest III: The Pirates of Pestulon*, by Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy, and *Headline Harry and the Great Paper Race*, by Davidson.

I suggest that students play these games in pairs so they can discuss what to do next, help each other find clues, or, if necessary, look up words in an English-English dictionary. It doesn't really matter how far into the game they get, but the fact that they read and use English as naturally as possible and in a fun and interesting way is definitely a great asset.

Bibliography

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